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Toward a Model to Leverage Informal and Incidental Learning in Family Contexts

There is something rewarding about being in a group that can communicate with minimal effort. Otherwise, what is it that makes family members sit around inconsequentially, as if there's invisible value in being together—as if time spent together doing nothing is virtuous, whereas the same time spent with other people would be a waste?

Nuala O'Faolain *Almost There: The Onward Journey of a Dublin Woman.* New York: Riverhead Books, 2003, p. 176.

Abstract

Purpose **–** The authors describe research aimed at developing:
1) a more comprehensive framework for informal and incidental learning in family contexts;
2) a learning dashboard customized for parents interested in enhancing their capacity to reflect on the ways in which they learn to face the challenges, changes, and periods of transition that their own families go through.

Design/methodology/approach **–** Our proposed model grows out of a

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reanalysis of data from an earlier study that focused on understanding practical learning and situated knowledge that adults feel meaningful and relevant to constructing their own parental identities, their modes of belonging, and their trajectories of participation in their respective families.

Findings – Findings are based on a multiple case study in which Italian parents residing in Milan and Italian-American parents living in New York City, all belonging to upper-middle-class families, were interviewed. Italian families were also involved in laboratories designed to support them in the processes of collective critical reflection on their familial practices.

Research limitations/implications – This study followed a grounded theory research design, formulated to enable development of a *middle-range substantive theory* that is well suited to:

1) explaining the informal and incidental learning paths through which adults construct practices of parenthood;
2) defining a learning architecture and designing a research-based self-report inventory to recognize and assess them.

Originality/value – We present informal and incidental learning examples occurring in family contexts that range from predictable "crises" to those that are unanticipated and not routine, and a self-report inventory for self-assessing parental learning practices and their possible outcomes. We discuss transformative dimensions of informal learning that become important when parents' frames of reference are self-perceived as distorted or dysfunctional when confronted with the more or less critical events that mark family life cycles. We also conceptualize informal and incidental learning through a practice-based approach in the attempt to provide a theoretical vocabulary that enables thought about knowing and learning as processes that are: social, materially-and-historically-mediated, emergent, situated, and always open-ended and temporary in character.

Keywords – Informal and Incidental Learning; Transformative Learning; Practice-Based Approach; Parenthood; Learning Dashboard; Learning Model;
Overview

This article focuses on definitions, models and examples of informal and incidental learning in family contexts that are based on theories of learning from experience. Even though the concepts of informal and incidental learning were originated and developed within a predominantly workplace-learning literature (Marsick & Watkins, 1990; 2015; Cseh, Watkins & Marsick, 1999; Marsick, 2009; Marsick, Watkins, Callahan & Volpe, 2006), they offer a family-relevant heuristic to:

1) describe the processes of practical learning through which adults construct their own parental identities, their modes of belonging, and their trajectories of participation in their respective families;

2) support parents in recognizing, improving and reaping the benefits of their informal and incidental learning in achieving the family goals for which they strive.

A family is a culture in itself and a nexus of several different contexts and groups (Ochs, Pontecorvo & Fasulo, 1996). Differences in age, occupation, and, sometimes, gender among family members (to cite only some of the most evident categories) warrant surfacing and negotiation of meanings that mix or put into conflict different perspectives and ideologies (Pontecorvo & Fasulo, 1999). Its members are not exposed to a coherent and stable representation of facts and norms about how things are or should be, but, rather, to a continuous process of perspectives confrontation.

Becoming a parent is a socialization process whereby adults learn to exercise the duties of care towards their own family members, and to construct parenthoods felt as appropriate, sensible, and relevant to family circumstances over time. Parents practice and learn their role *in situ* through strategies including observation, reflection (in, or on, action), experimentation, and trial-and-error—often while engaging with others who are also looking for solutions to similar problems, new ideas and pathways that facilitate satisfying living.

A parent learns to be a parent, mostly, from being a child in a family (with all the good and bad consequences of family style inheritance), just as teachers learn their role, in significant part from their having been students (Taylor, 2002). It is possible to recognize in family worlds shared histories of learning characterized by a generational becoming where the relationship between parents and children is bound to previ-

ous histories and open to future ones. Family life is a try for generations to come and, at least in the early steps of its development, is the outcome of the encounter among parental styles that the parental couple has learned in their respective families of origin. Beyond the connotations that comparison between the current nucleus and the family of origin can assume, parental identities are constructed within relational spaces where negotiating possible positionings can occur with respect to received cultural inheritances (Davies, Harré, 1990; Bamberg, 1997). Habits, value horizons, beliefs, rituals, artifacts, symbols, expectations, conventions, more or less consciously or unconsciously pass through each new family nucleus.

There are complex processes of informal and incidental learning through which parents construct situated knowledge considered somehow capable both of guaranteeing the comprehensibility of the family environment and of managing the factual changes, critical events, and everyday issues that go through it. These processes, which can help parents become knowledgeable subjects, cultural experts, and competent interpreters of the familial world they live in, are social, materially-and-historically-mediated, emergent, situated, and always open-ended (Nicolini et al., 2003). Their possible outcomes are beliefs, worldviews, practices, frames of reference, actions, narratives, and ways of being that are both pre-reflexive/implicit and reflexively constitutive of family contexts from which they arise.

Our purpose is to present a model that will enable leveraging informal and incidental learning in family contexts–supporting parents in becoming increasingly self-directed in designing their own family growth and a desirable future.

We present:
1) conceptual perspectives and theoretical frameworks that underlie our model;
2) selected informal and incidental learning examples that occurred in family contexts that illustrate both more or less routine, predictable crises that call for learning and familial negotiation of meaning; and
3) a self-report inventory for self-assessing parental learning practices and their possible outcomes.

Theoretical Frameworks

The model of informal and incidental learning proposed by Marsick and Watkins (1990; 2011; 2015) conceptualized informal learning as a problem-framing and a problem-solving cycle that emphasizes ways by which social context shapes interpretation and action. Its epistemic lineage extends from Dewey (1938), through Lewin (1946), Argyris (1982, 1996), Schön (1987), and Mezirow (and Associates, 1990, 2000; 2006). Marsick and Watkins (1990) described how learning grows out of workplace and daily life contexts, is triggered by something problematic or surprising happening in those contexts, proceeds through identifying and trying solutions, and, further, is enhanced by critical reflection throughout the process.

Informal learning–a category that includes, but differentiates, incidental learning–occurs everywhere, including within institutions. Unlike formal learning, it is neither typically classroom-based nor highly structured. The impetus and control for such learning rests primarily within the learner. Incidental learning is conceptualized as "a byproduct of some other activity, such as task accomplishment, interpersonal interaction, sensing the group and contextual culture, trial-and-error experimentation, or even formal learning" (Marsick & Watkins, 1990, p. 12).

Informal learning can be deliberately encouraged or it can take place despite an environment that is not highly conducive to learning. Social learning and interaction nurture the often tacit, individually driven nature of much informal learning. Marsick & Neaman (2018) elaborate: "informal learning often happens just-in-time as needed–anywhere, any time, and in any place–in response to challenges that call for new or modified knowledge, skills or attitudes. Of course, people also learn informally for its own sake to satisfy curiosity or pursue interests. Informal learning is organic, prompted by the situation at hand. It is intentional, even though goals may not be explicitly formulated; intentions direct attention and thus help learners to recognize gaps and strive to close them" (pp. 1-2). Incidental learning, on the other hand, almost always takes place when people are not conscious of it (Marsick & Watkins, 1990).

While informal learning is construed as an intentional process that does not follow structured paths, the learning that adults achieve incidentally occurs within levels of consciousness that are mostly taken-for-granted and tacit. Since incidental learning is a by-product of informal learning from experience and/or problem-solving, such learning is brought into awareness when, after taking action, something helps one identify what happened or what was learned, e.g, through reflecting on action or on the problem that catalyzed action (Marsick & Watkins, 1990). Both informal and incidental learning are hard to detect, intercept and control because such learning is pervasive and intertwined with tasks that call for new learning.

In the Marsick and Watkins framework (Marsick, 1987), the process of learning was originally defined as "the way in which individuals or groups acquire, interpret, reorganize, change or assimilate a related cluster of information, skills and feelings. Elsewhere, it was also seen as primary to the way in which people construct meaning in their personal and shared organizational lives" (Marsick, 1987, p. 4). A human-resource-development perspective drove identification of various levels of formal, informal and incidental learning in organizations (Watkins & Marsick, 1990). The learning cone was used to examine learning at the following four levels:
1) the individual;
2) the groups in which people work and live;
3) the organization itself;
4) professional groups and communities, whose learning is greatly influenced by norms set outside the organization.

Learning can take place at one of these four levels or at several simultaneously. Marsick & Watkins (2015) suggested that scholars conceptualize informal learning differently based on how they understand the nature of learning from experience, which is at the heart of both informal and incidental learning. Two common current bases for theorizing informal learning include pragmatism and socio-cultural-historical activity theory.

Pragmatic theories, based on the work of Dewey (1938), utilize an adaptation of the scientific method as it is applied to problem solving. Evidence-based reflection on data gathered throughout one's learning is at its core. Learning occurs through error detection and

correction. Reflection—especially when it includes examination of underlying assumptions—helps people interpret and learn from their experiences.

Socio-cultural-historical activity theory is rooted in the work of Vygotsky (1978) and, more recently, in that of Lave and Wenger (1991) and Billett (2001, 2002). While pragmatic learning theories focus on the individual as the agent of his/her own learning, socio-cultural-historical activity theory emphasizes situated learning and social cognition. "People learn through socialization, e.g., by observing and interacting with significant others who have power or credibility to regulate access to knowledge, skill, and resources" (Marsick & Watkins, 2015, p. 238). Individuals are not seen as necessarily proactively learning in order to build capacities for achieving new goals, but rather, are conceptualized as being nudged and pushed toward learning their way into addressing challenges or demands. Sociocultural theory, according to Billett (1996), emphasizes the defining and negotiation that occur within a particular social situation, which makes it problematic "to separate individuals' performance of tasks from the social process of defining and negotiating the task and its goals" (p. 271). When this construct is applied to informal learning, it is not only difficult to separate the individual from the social context, but also, it is desirable to highlight the impact of social influences on informal learning.

In *family* contexts, authors conceptualize informal and incidental learning, adopting a practice-based approach because:

1) They are oriented towards processes; i.e, what people do in action.
2) They involve an interest in the social aspects of knowing and learning; placing processes of knowing not in the mind of the individual but in a social subject.
3) They pay attention to the un-orderly, using terms such as uncertainty, conflict and incoherence.
4) They see knowledge as situated in a spatio-temporal context.
5) The material, artifactual and historical aspects of social life are viewed as central for understanding how knowing and learning emerge in practice (Nicolini et al., 2003).

323

We discuss, here, also transformative dimensions of informal learning that become important when parents' mindsets and frames of reference, as shaped by life experiences, lead to distorted or dysfunctional perceptions of experience and are then constructively reframed after critical examination of underlying assumptions. (Mezirow, 2003; Marsick & Neaman, 2018). The mechanism by which adults transform their mindsets is perspective taking—through which they begin to see their situation from others' viewpoints[5]. As Kegan (1994) describes, adults develop more complex mindsets when they can take as object that to which they had been subject; i.e., when what was taken-for-granted as "fact" is then seen as only one of several ways to understand a situation (Marsick & Neaman, 2018). According to Mezirow (1991), such changes initially come about by surfacing, examining, and if warranted, altering or replacing dysfunctional assumptions, views, and beliefs that adults have internalized through earlier life experiences. In this way, adults can transform a point of view in a particular situation, or a broader habit of mind that frames meaning making in that situation.

Then, sharing thinking with others leads to further examination of their interpretation of the situation. By this process, adults may come to new viewpoints that they can test, assuming new roles—roles in which, by gathering feedback, they can assess results of action, and confirm or disconfirm their latest understanding. Iterative learning

[5] Adults interpret new experiences through the lens of past experiences. They form overarching meaning perspectives, or habits of mind, and case-specific viewpoints that they can come to believe are objective facts even when other would disagree and when evidence would not fully support their views (Mezirow, 1991; Marsick & Neaman, 2018). Mezirow's transformative learning theory (1991) suggested that adults can transform their meaning perspectives by critically reflecting on taken-for-granted assumptions and construct new or adjusted frames of reference that are more inclusive and discriminating. As Mezirow (1999) later described, transformative learning typically begins when adults experience a "disorienting dilemma" of some kind. Adults can recognize that the meaning they bring to interpreting the situation is not accurate, and then probe for alternative perspectives. Sharing thinking with others leads to further examination of their interpretation of the situation. Assuming new roles, adults can then come to new viewpoints that they can also test within a different context. By gathering feedback, they can assess results and confirm or disconfirm their fully evolved, now more inclusive understanding.

cycles of this kind lead to greater accuracy in diagnosing and framing situations that, for effective response, require transformative informal learning, including an increased capacity to learn through and from experience.

How Parents Learn: Knowledge Construction and Repertories of Practices

Generations, genders, lineage, hopes, gifts, duties, debts, affection, responsibility, generativity, values, secrets, objectives, transmissions, and transitions: these are the main family themes (Cigoli & Scabini, 2007). These are factors in creating what the family relationship builds in terms of organization structure, motives, and objectives, and influencing the learning processes underlying it.

The authors present several examples of informal and incidental learning and of transformation of perspectives occurring in family contexts. Such examples are part of data collected in an earlier study (Bracci, 2012; 2017) that focused on understanding practical learning and situated knowledge that adults feel meaningful and relevant to constructing their own parental identities, their modes of belonging, and their trajectories of participation in their respective families. The research from which they are drawn was a multiple-case study in which forty-three Italian parents residing in Milan and twenty-seven first-, second-, or third-generation Italian-Americans living in New York City, all belonging to upper-middle-class families, were interviewed. Parents in Italy were also involved in laboratories designed to support them in the processes of collective critical reflection on their familial practices.

This study followed a grounded theory research design, formulated to enable development of a middle-range substantive theory that is well-suited to explaining the informal and incidental learning paths through which adults construct practices of parenthood. This research provided windows into the thinking of parents from which to observe how different identities are formed, inherited, rejected, interlocked, and transformed through mutual engagement among parents in practice from generation to generation. Bracci analyzed relational, constructive,

and processual dimensions of family life through examination of the meanings with which parents conducted and interpreted their own everyday experiences and the activity systems in which they participated. A parent was considered both an *actor*—characterized by the role he or she performs—and an *agent*—an individual endowed with intentions and able to make sense of what is going on around him or her.

Analysis of interviews allowed the researcher to observe that parents tend to emphasize the relevance of practical knowledge—itself constructed through recursive processes of social transaction—that they must surface and subject to critical reflection in order to construct a parenthood that is felt as sensible and relevant. Interviewees' stories underline how this kind of knowledge cannot be separated from the process giving rise to it. Such learning is an activity intrinsic to relational processes within the family.

The interviews point up that parental competence:

1) is learned *from* and rooted *in* the experience lived in the family of origin as a child;
2) is constructed through sharing and negotiation within the parental couple of ways of interpreting the parental function and their respective roles;
3) requires learning from successive generations and assuming children as interlocutors increasingly active in contributing to family development;
4) is enriched and assessed by the observation of, and interaction with, other family contexts.

Spontaneous Examples of Informal and Incidental Learning

The model developed by Marsick and Watkins (2001, 2011) offers a heuristic for interpreting the continuously evolving process of learning that happens in family contexts and that shapes the construction of parental identity. Figure 1 represents an adaptation of this model to the family context.

Figure 1. Marsick & Watkins Informal and Incidental Learning Model applied to the family. (Adapted from Marsick and Watkins, 1990, further adapted by Cseh, Watkins and Marsick, 1999; Marsick and Neaman, 2018)

This model presents what parents selectively attend to or leave out in their interpretations of events; how they consider alternatives; "whether and how they examine consequences or learn from errors; and how they take observations into account in planning next steps" (Marsick & Watkins 2015, p. 239). The cycle begins with "triggers" that lead to awareness of knowledge gaps and surprises. The outer circle circumscribes the sphere within which these disorienting and challenging experiences may occur, i.e., the learning environment that, from a personal, social, family, and cultural viewpoint plays a key role in influencing parents' interpretative mechanisms, choices, and actions that they undertake, and thus the kind of learning that follows. The prompting/triggering stimulus can be perceived and recognized only through the meaning perspectives *with* and *through* which parents interpret, evaluate, and pay attention to certain experiences and leave others behind. Any new insight may require going back and questioning previous insights.

Different factors can influence the process of interpreting family context and parents' identity in ways that may simply involve relatively familiar interactions or a more complex relationship system with multiple actors involved and social and cultural norms never before addressed (Cseh, Watkins & Marsick, 1999). The difficulty inherent in this process lies in the need to develop the ability to discern and modify the factors that influence the awareness and interpretation of parents' blind spots that are usually enlarged by the emotional aspects involved. Although the model is shown in a circular sequence, the steps are neither linear nor necessarily sequential.

Within this framework, the interest lies in finding how, and under what conditions, parents can be prompted to recognize and get the most out of learning from experiences through habits of reflection, questioning, and deliberate analysis. We offer an example for an indepth look at the spontaneous informal learning of an Italian mother who was interviewed. The interviewee is "Sara" (a pseudonym), a white

mother in her forties, who is a manager in the non-profit sector. She reported that she has been driven all her life by a desire to: *make deliberate choices about the direction that her children might take*. She is aware that *this philosophy has clear roots in the way that I was raised, and, hopefully, is a chosen reaction to these roots. I remember that I hadn't many opportunities for making choices, because my father decided everything for everyone in our family. He always objected to what I would like to do*. Nonetheless, Sara related that she entered into a fairly conventional marital contract during a period that she characterized as one of *reaction, survival and following a narrow direction*. When she got pregnant and had her daughter, she realized that she would like to offer another type of upbringing to her daughter.

I spent years trying to convince myself that, if I had a kid I wouldn't behave the way my father did, with all his hypocrisy . . . being afraid that neighbors could hear our screams during fights . . . the need of having a daughter who wears lace collars, who does great at school and plays tennis on Sundays after mass. I hated him. I tried being a parent who listened to her kids' needs and who wasn't afraid to handle problems. Despite this, something unexpected happened: *I wouldn't be able to explain how it happened, but when I became a mom with my first daughter I found myself thinking as my father had. I found myself BEING my father, without even realizing it. Nunzia had to be well behaved, capable and not afraid of daring. I wanted her to move quickly, I wanted her to learn to walk early, learn to talk. I was terrified by the thought she could fail, as if I had forgotten how hard it had been for me never to feel protected, excused, free to make mistakes or ask for help. I, who had been doomed to be a perfect child, wanted a perfect daughter. And if someone had made me notice, I would have denied it and also gotten quite mad*.

Sara's interview supports understanding the perspectives and the meaning schemes that orient Sara's processes of decision-making and parental behaviors. Her daughter didn't meet her mother's expectations. The prompting experience with her daughter, Nunzia, showed Sara how much she was determined to have an influence over the educational process and experience for her daughter, a determination that was reflected in her choices.

I actually believed in this "lie" until my daughter decided to become a

teenager. Green hair, pierced nose, terrible grades at school and dreadful friends. It was as if I was looking back to my own teenage years, but this time I was my father! [Referring to daughter] The only thing I managed to do was ignoring her, growing far apart from her and carrying my battles silently without saying things. Sara's interview illustrated her pattern of learning informally by discussing the way in which she learned how to become parent of a teenager who was not meeting her expectations: she realized that she had to assess needs and find the resources to start to think critically about becoming a better parent.

Consistent with the Marsick & Watkins problem-framing and solving cycle, Sara drew on past experience in recognizing patterns and identifying when the pattern previously and unconsciously acquired did not fit the present situation. Her family history is the source of what she has internalized as far as values, myths and models of relationships that constitutes a meaning scheme by which a parent interprets things that happen within her own family. The influence of her family history in the construction of her parental identity is something that was taken for granted, that happened beyond analytic elaboration at an individual level and that represents, at least partially, the result of un-mediated assimilation. Sara defines the development of her own maternal identity in connection and distinction with the previous generations as something unavoidable. Sara's daughter's behaviors represent an external situation (trigger) that prompts a growing dissatisfaction with her ways of thinking and being a parent generating surprise—all of which causes learning. The situation with her daughter—her reaction to what is experienced as uncertain—required an interpretative effort capable of comparing present similarities and differences in the situation with her previous experiences as a daughter. The consequence is an enriched view of how to move in the current context.

Stopping to reflect and assess helped her understand the complexity of the situation and test whether or not her assumptions and judgments were accurate. Sara recognizes that her current experiences do not fit her prior meaning frames: she tries to insert her current experiences into more flexible meaning frames that allow her to evaluate what makes them problematic and challenging with respect to imagining and designing possible future evolutions. An automatically determined path

has thus been transformed into a transitional one with its own, now different, processes and timing and with an ample margin for choice (Scabini, Marta & Lanz, 2006).

The informal learning model challenges us to further enrich this perspective and to read the family realm as within neither a generic context nor a purely cultural one but, rather, as within a *social* context that has been organized by the behavior of multiple actors. When considering the family as an organization that is located at the intersection of gender, identity and generational lines, this perspective makes it possible to gather how parents position themselves in alignment with their family history. Their family history represents what they have acquired in terms of values, myths and models of relationships. Sara senses her family of origin as a strong influence on the context and life of her new family nucleus: her parental identity is necessarily now conceptualized both in connection with, and in distinction from, the identity determined by previous generations. In sum, we see that by examining potential challenges to action enabled by unveiling unconscious assimilation of prior family thought and behavior patterns, critical reflection and inquiry can help parents modify such assimilated values, beliefs and practices in the face of situations that call for new responses.

A Transformative Experience

The relationships between family members and processes of learning that occur within it reveal themselves most emphatically during times of passage, for example, when the family is called on to change its organization and to disclose its strengths and weaknesses (Cigoli & Scabini, 2007). This theme of transitions has become a leitmotif in the psychological literature (Bengston & Allen, 1993; Ruble & Seidman, 1996; Scabini, Marta & Lanz, 2007). Over time, attention has shifted from the analysis of single stages of the family life cycle to the moment of passage from one stage to another and to the coping processes that allow families to face the change (Falicov, 1988).

Transitions are prompted by critical events or disorienting dilemmas—to use Mezirow's language—that may be either predictable or un-

predictable. The critical aspect of the event resides in the fact that it opens a window on uncertainty, calls for a change and throws up new objectives that may either promote development or constitute an obstacle and a blockage for the family (Scabini, Marta & Lanz, 2007). Such events are those resulting from the acquisition of new family members (due to marriages, births, adoptions) and those resulting from losses (deaths, separations, illnesses). Other equally specific events appear less focused and delimited, such as the transition to adulthood or old age (Donati, 2011).

A crisis set off by a critical event may offer the parent a special opportunity to recognize and reassess:

1) the structure of assumptions and expectations which frame her/his own thinking, feeling, and acting;

2) whether, and to what degree, it is possible to modify the relationships within the family in the light of the changes required by the transition.

Transformative learning theory—as articulated by Mezirow (1991, 2000, 2003), Marsick & Watkins (1999), Cranton (2006), and Taylor (2006; 2009)—provides a conceptual and methodological framework to understand how parents may potentially become aware of, and learn to question, taken-for-granted and culturally assimilated assumptions about their own practices, identities and roles, so that they may generate beliefs and opinions that will prove more true or justified to guide action. This process may not be linear or sequential or appear at the time to be logical, but it is essentially a rational process of seeing that previously held views no longer fit— that they are too narrow, too limiting, and do not explain the problems that parents meet (Cranton, King, 2003). When parents are led to examine their practice critically and thereby acquire alternative ways of understanding what they are doing, transformative learning can take place—both spontaneously emergent as well as facilitated. Mezirow (2006) highlights that "transformations may be *epochal*—sudden major reorientations in habit of mind, often associated with significant life crises—or *cumulative*, a progressive sequence of insights resulting in changes in points of view and leading to a transformation in habits of mind" (p. 28). Most transformative learning takes place outside of awareness; intuition substitutes for critical reflection of assumptions (Dirkx, 2012).

331

Below we present a transformative journey that an Italian-American parent has undertaken and related during an interview. The paragraph illustrates different segments of the narrative that the father shared in the course of our conversation in a completely spontaneous way concerning some critical turning points comparable to the phases of perspective transformation outlined by Mezirow (1990, 2003). His story is a powerful example of transformation of someone's evolving perspectives.

Transformation of the sense of Self of "Mario,"
an Italian-American father of two children

A disorienting dilemma

My son committed suicide four years ago. He left a note, saying that he could not bear the guilt and shame generated by being himself. My wife hates me because I did not want to accept what happened and, worse still, that Fulvio killed himself because he had thought that his family would never have accepted his homosexuality. My son wrote that he considered himself a brave person, because it's not in everyone's capability to be able to slit his or her wrists. I believe that he did not shoot himself with a bullet in his head just to do one last favor for his mother. He felt that we could have hugged him one last time, whole and entire.

Self-examination with feelings of fear, anger, guilt and shame

Nature wants children to bury fathers. Fulvio was twenty-three. I'll never be myself again. I will always have a hole inside, as if I were missing a part of me, as if I were missing a leg. My psychiatrist would like to persuade me that the sense of guilt will not help me to face my loss, but there are no evidence able to eradicate from my head the conviction of being an Italian clod, stuck with the myth of the macho. I was so glad I had two sons.

A critical assessment of assumptions

My son was right, I would have been really angry if he had told me about being a homosexual; it would have been a huge humiliation. I spent a lifetime saying "do not be a faggot" or "ugly queer" or "sissy" every time that my sons did not behave like real men. I never had the slightest suspicion. I wore blinders. He was not an effeminate man. I grew up in Brooklyn. The gays I knew were good-for-nothings and whores, beggars reeking of HIV. Times have changed, especially in New York, but not for me and not for my son. My wife thinks I'm responsible. Our relationship is irreparably broken, but not the one with my little son. I want to try to help him, I do not want him to feel alone just like Fulvio [the firstborn].

Recognition that one's discontent and the process of transformation are shared

I did not know what to do. I took psychiatric drugs and antidepressants. Getting up from bed and shaving my beard were an achievement. My psychiatrist suggested that I participate in a support group, a thing I had already rejected when one had tried to invite me after my prostate surgery. I thought to be good for nothing—only able to whine and enjoy the misfortunes of others. I was initially wrong in my thinking in this case also. Now I have lived for years waiting for it to be Thursday [the day of a support group meeting]. I did not find whiners. I found fathers full of a sense of guilt, just like me. Parents who had hated homosexuals and who were not able to see the suffering of their own children.

Exploration of options for new roles, relationships and action

I felt the need to go look for my son. I contacted his old friends, one of whom took me for a madman, and others showed me aspects of Fulvio I did not know. His best friend told me he was gay; he still was not ready to say it because he plays in a rugby team. He told me to stay close to Achille [the second son]. *I didn't understand, but a doubt began to creep into my mind but I did not want to listen to it. He was twenty, I had never heard of his having any girlfriend. My mom always said that he was dressed as a dandy.*

Planning a course of action, acquiring knowledge and skills for implementing one's plans, and provisional trying of new roles

Do not be a coward, I told myself. Do you want to lose another son? I didn't know what to do, but I decided that I wouldn't allow myself to be afraid that Achille [the second son] *was homosexual. I asked some members of my support group and my neighbor for help with this—an old man whom I have always offended, calling him queer, in despite of his kindness. I did not want to embarrass my second son. I was terrified of hurting him and; deep down, I was hoping this was all in my head. I decided to write to him a letter, my neighbor helped me, because I'm not good with words.*

Building competence and self-confidence in new roles and relationships

My wife was separated from me, full of hate, and still depressed. I invited my son to come to a few meetings of my group. I tried to make him understand that I was not the idiot I had been before, even if what I had done to Fulvio was unforgivable. One night, Achille came into my room, he was crying and he said: "I too am gay". Ever since that night a new possibility has opened between my son and me The possibility of having a new relationship—full of grief for the loss of Fulvio, but full of the desire to understand each other.

A reintegration into one's life on the basis of conditions dictated by one's new perspective

I am part of a group of parents of LGBTQ youth. I participate in school projects on homophobic bullying and discrimination. I met my son's boyfriend. What can I say? He is a handsome boy, an engineer. Who cares what my relatives say about us? I am proud. I'm a different person than I was four years ago. Everything is turned upside down. My son is studying medicine at Columbia University. I will also be able to have a nephew, if he ever wants to have a child one day. Not a day goes by without thinking of Fulvio and of all my mistakes. I would do anything to see him again, even only through a keyhole.

This father describes his own present parental identity as the outcome of a history of learning, whose outcome is uncertain and unpredictable: a challenge to fulfill, rather than a permanent condition, which situates him within changing and fragile family configurations where he must learn to position himself and to construct his own parenthood practices. The interviewee reports learning from mistakes and dialogue with others—in particular, with adults who share similar problems—as the primary informal learning strategy that helped him acquire the reflective practical skills he perceived as necessary to foster the development of the relationship with his son.

A Framework for a Parental Informal Learning Dashboard

We have described family informal and incidental learning as unique, situated, historically and socially influenced and negotiated over time. Much of that learning required self-direction by taking up one's sense of agency to interrupt patterns inherited from the past and negotiate new ways of thinking and living together as a family unit. At the same time, parents reported that social interaction helped them to see their situations from different perspectives, reframe their experiences, see gaps in awareness, and find ways to learn and experiment with alternative roles and futures. The families in Italy in Bracci's (2012) study were supported through social, facilitated learning laboratories. All of the parents described help from talking with peers, friends and

family, spiritual guidance, or professional support (e.g., educators, counselors, therapists, social care or mental health specialists). Support groups, reading materials and other resources were drawn upon to help them think and act in new ways.

Are there ways that professionals who support parents and families can use the informal and incidental learning cycle described in this article to help parents organize learning resources to be more useful to the parents with whom they are working? As we conclude this article, we explore the idea of developing customized learning dashboards for parents to support their progress toward goals and to prepare their learning.

We adapt this idea from the use of high technology tools to construct ongoing access to knowledge and expertise in areas of interest. Through a smart phone, sometimes a tablet, and a laptop computer, people connect to e-mail, the internet, documents, and on-line resources. They often personalize a learning dashboard to give them easy access to updates on news, financial indicators, or weather; quick links to key information and video resources, and communication tools with friends and colleagues, such as What'sApp or Siri/text. Those using I-Google home page may access tools for their work (e.g., a thesaurus or dictionary for translation and writing, a price comparison tool, RSS feeds on areas of interest, etc.). The instantaneous and constant information flow is almost like background noise—a melody played off stage to the drama of every day life—quietly sustaining and supporting development.

A learning dashboard can put key information into parents' hands when they need it. However, it can be challenging for them to sort through a plethora of resources without help in curating choices. How could parents select the best information for their situations? The rapid availability of information—and simultaneous need for help in finding appropriate, relevant, good information—often at critical moments when time is short—is a compelling reason to develop a set of informal learning resources customized to particular needs. Such resources can support self-directed learning when professional or other resources are not available.

What can educators, researchers and professionals do to support parents in gathering electronic resources that will be most helpful? One consideration is that it is easier to create a learning dashboard for routine, predictable family learning needs, for example, helping children with

homework or anticipating the mixed emotions of natural transitions to new classrooms or schools, or different stages of developmental growth. In the two examples of parental informal learning above, some events led to unanticipated but valued learning. Such learning may be hard to intentionally support, yet very valuable to parents experiencing it.

Watkins (2013) introduced the idea of customized, personal learning dashboards that support learning and change in workplaces. Employees are expected to set and measure progress toward personal development goals that are aligned with business needs and supported by resources, rewards, and organizational culture. Learning dashboards consist of all resources that facilitate much of the formal, as well as informal, and incidental learning via activities, systems, and policies that promote individual, team, and organizational learning and knowledge creation. Some of these are formal and structured such as training; an equivalent for parents might be the facilitated learning labs in Bracci's (2012) study. But many resources on a learning dashboard might support knowledge acquisition that is informal and incidental. For example, companies expect employees to learn on their own using intranet or internet resources such as podcasts, portals or YouTube services such as Lynda.com. Company websites support internal communities of practice for employees who work with peers on common interests or challenges. Dashboards provide access to online coaching and mentoring, or to knowledge experts. They provide infrastructure to support learning from experience, such as After Action Reviews—a vehicle through which employees examine completed work using a protocol that identifies individual interpretations of intended goals, evidence of what happened, and in particular, a no-blame assessment of why things went wrong if they did, and how operations can be improved.

Potential Contribution of Informal Learning Cycles

Informal and Incidental Learning Cycle as a Framework for Learning Dashboards

The informal and incidental learning cycle can be used as a frame-

work for learning dashboards that are suited to the cycle's different steps—keeping in mind that these steps are not linear and often interactive. Marsick and Watkins (1990) based their cycle on three phases of decision making during un-programmed activity identified by Simon (1960):

1) *intelligence activity in which the individual searches the environment for conditions calling for a decision;*

2) *design activity in which the individual invents, develops, and analyzes courses of action;*

3) *choice activity. This process parallels informal learning. Although informal learning is often said to lack design, it is more accurate to say that it lacks design imposed by others. Rather, it can be thought of in terms of the artistry of expert practitioners described by Schön (1983) in their "reflective conversation with a situation." (Marsick & Watkins, 1990, p. 22)*

Dashboards for parental learning would differ in focus for each of these three phases: intelligence, design, choice.

Intelligence activity involves recognizing circumstances as a trigger for learning, framing the context, and interpreting the experience. We see this intelligence activity in Mario's experience of his son's suicide and his steps toward meaning making and recognition of his own biases that could have been a factor in his son's suicide. A therapist helped him deal with guilt, his wife's anger, and societal reactions. When Mario began to explore options for new roles, relationships and actions, and planning a course of action he moved toward design activity. He also made choices along the way as he tried on new behaviors and roles, and built competence and self-confidence. As he did so he participated in a group of parents of LGBTQ youth and made different choices in his relationship with his remaining son.

Intelligence activity involves increasing self-awareness so that parents recognize a gap between espoused ideas and actual truths in practice. Sara, the mother in the first example, had such an *Aha!* moment—a significant learning about her identification with her father's role and parental style when her daughter refused to behave and look like she was supposed to. For many adults, the process of learning through ex-

periences is routine; it becomes almost automatic and part of their tacit knowledge acquisition. In situations like Sara's, deeper reflection and self-awareness are essential.

A dashboard to enhance self-awareness would enable exposure to others' points of view in order to foster perspective taking that might help parents recognize their mindsets and actions. One way of doing this would be to ask questions to facilitate a process of discussion and/or reflection on what happened in their own family life cycles and what people did. Figure 2 below, for example, poses questions that parents can ask themselves to recall and reflect on what are often called critical incidents—that is, situations so vivid in sensory detail that they can be recalled and reexamined as if they have just happened. Reflecting on critical incidents can enable parents to re-evaluate and learn in new ways from their previous experiences.

Questions	• Who or what triggered the learning?
	• In what context? What was important about that context?
	• How did you interpret the problem or challenge?
	• What did you do to learn more about it? Who or what helped you?
	• What strategies or solutions did you consider?
	• What did you have to learn in order to implement the selected strategy?
	• How did it turn out?
	• What were the key lessons learned from this experience? What surprised you?

Figure 2: Questioning life experiences to increase parental self-awareness

Intelligence activity may take time and is recurrent over the cycle of informal learning. It eventually leads to formulation of goals and intentions—even though it may take a while to understand the intuitive insights gained and to express these explicitly as learning goals.

The next consideration for a dashboard would be what would help support *design activity*—directed toward developing new strategies and learning how to use them. Mario engaged in design activity when he looked up old friends and asked for their help in contacting his remaining son, also homosexual, by writing him a letter because he feared his words might not be effective face-to-face. Design activity can be sup-

ported by populating a dashboard with relevant books, blogs, videos with expert advice or stories that others share about what they did in similar circumstances. Parents might well need help in locating professionals and guides who can help them to sort through and weigh alternative learning sources, decide what they, themselves, are capable of doing or what they can learn to do differently, and get coaching or other support in learning and taking effective action. Family members involved in emotionally charged negotiations also need emotional support and may need to learn balance caring for their own needs against needs of other family members.

Hence, among other things, a dashboard might need to include information on how to access needed counseling and therapeutic interventions or spiritual guidance.

Resources on a dashboard to support *choice activity* would include what is needed to follow through on initiatives undertaken, which will include and/or lead to additional cycles of intelligence and design activity. Choices are made throughout the informal and incidental learning cycle, but many of these will be tacit or intuitive and hence not available for rational examination. Many resources could be similar to those needed for effective design since they involve knowledge, behaviors, and attitudes central to effective implementation.

The informal and incidental learning cycle points out the need to also monitor and examine consequences of action during this phase of learning— examining not only what was planned or expected, but also what was *unintended* because the latter often holds the seeds of future intelligence activity. What worked as intended? What did not? What was learned? What else does one need to find out? Consultation with peers, family, friends or professionals is especially needed at these times to help parents see and understand unintended consequences that might be important to future success vs. failure. Empathy is key on the part of people supporting the learner. So, too, is the learner's resilience. As is the case with design activity, outcomes include feelings, attitudes, and strongly held values or views that might be hard to put into words. Parents could be helped to work through these factors and think about what would change if their goals were achieved and how they could monitor success. Many of these change indicators would likely be qual-

339

itative and situated. However, there might be information on public websites, and in particular social service agency websites, that could assist parents in identifying trends, and tools that are relevant to monitoring hard-to-discern outcomes that help them to determine whether or not actions taken are having desired results, or that unintended consequences are undermining family goals. Parental resources such as those at webmd, pinterest, scary mommy, artfulparent.com, kids.gov, familyeducation.com, can be useful tools to have at ones fingertips.

Using the Parental Informal Learning Dashboard (PILD)

There are several reasons, both educational and practical, why the Parental Informal Learning dashboard could be especially useful. The reflective nature of the methodological tools that could be provided may allow parents to (1) understand the educational practices, family stories, the know-how and affective relationships that they preserve; and (2) draw attention to the meanings, values and common experiences that result from a shared condition about what it means to be parents.

One way to personalize the use of the dashboard is to use different kinds of questions to help parents explore very different aspects of meaning making, influences on parental identity and intelligence, design or choice activities:

- broad brush questions (e.g., *what do you think you have received from your family of origin and by whom?; With respect to experience in your family of origin, what are the aspects that you want to transmit to your children and what behaviors would you prefer not to repeat?*)
- critical event questions (e.g., *in the history of each family there are people who count in a particular way, there are events that have a weight on the lives of individuals who participate. In your family of origin which events stand out as turning points or as otherwise significant? Which people influenced these events and in what particular ways? Which events had weight?*)
- hypothetical projective questions (e.g., *what do you think you should have received from your father or mother, but for some reason, you did not receive*?)

Professionals might consider sharing structured protocols or other questioning tools they use with parental learning on a dashboard. Links to support groups that use these protocols can be helpful, whether or not groups specialize in parental learning. Examples of such protocols are common in medicine and science—e.g., structured expert elicitation (Hemming et al., 2017), Paragon Solutions (2016). They are also used in applied learning sciences, such as school leadership and change, e.g., Critical Friends (Annenberg Institute for School Reform, n.d.), Peeling Back the Onion (School Reform Initiative n.d.).

A protocol used by parent education laboratories in Italy (Bracci, 2012) is Action Learning Conversations. This protocol, based on Action Learning (O'Neil & Marsick, 2007), starts with the parent describing the challenge or opportunity being faced in the form of a question. The parent answers fact-based questions to provide context to a group of peers. Peers next engage in a process of asking questions—that the parent is asked to write down but not answer—to deepen insight into how the parent feels, makes meaning, and interprets the situation. For these kinds of questions, parents are asked to "be a fly on the wall," to listen but not to answer questions. Listening quietly opens new avenues of thought, whereas responding can lead to defending old thinking. The parent then cites one or two of the questions asked that helped her think differently. This is next followed by identifying assumptions group members think she holds or they might hold, if in her shoes. Then, everyone in the group except the parent states how he/she would reframe the question the parent originally raised. The parent then states her preferred reframing of the question (or confirms the original phrasing if that still is the best fit). The last step is an action step—e.g., getting more information, consulting others, or sometimes actually trying new actions.

A dashboard is simply a portal into a variety of resources and tools not unlike someone's personal bulletin on Internet platform. The variety of methods typically offered by a dashboard provides information and resources, but also supports deeper questioning and meaning making, the development of reflective capacities, and as appropriate, transformative learning to surface and examine sometimes subconscious dysfunctional assumptions that prevent goal accomplishment.

341

Dashboards offering these resources could be adopted by researchers, adult educators, and other professionals who assist parental learning to: (1) help parents gain deeper insight into their life experiences; (2) engage parents in critical reflection on fundamental assumptions, values, beliefs and world views; (3) help parents make connections among skills, experience and the type of knowledge required to perform parental functions and roles better than before.

In summary, a learning dashboard designed to facilitate informal and incidental learning includes a range of options that adult educators, researchers and helping professionals might want to offer people to help them become better parents. An adaptation of Watkins (2013) framework shown below in Table 2 illustrates its potential application to family learning.

Informal: On-demand	Informal: Social Networking	Informal: Social and Reflective Learning
Internet Search	Wikis, Blogs	Feedback
Books, Articles, Videos	Communities of Practice	Family Development Planning
Podcasts	Forums	Learning Teams
Best Practices	Social Networks	Action Learning Conversations
Learning/Knowledge Portals	Coaching and Mentoring	Experiential Laboratories
Data repository	Conferences	Structured Protocols

Table 1: Elements of a parental learning infrastructure, based on Watkins (2013, p. 20).

Conclusions and Implications for Practice

The practice-based framework outlined above is useful for understanding close family units because, with close ties, also comes a good deal of tacit knowledge that is unconsciously socialized through "legitimate peripheral participation" (Lave & Wenger, 1991). To sum up, parental informal learning occurs from and through experience, is intertwined with tasks and challenges, is tied to processes, roles and norms that discipline family life, and is collective and social, often recurring in the exchanges and interactions with others. Critical reflection and

inquiry can help parents modify assimilated values, beliefs and practices in the face of situations that call for new responses to the situation.

Some factors and tools seem especially important for supporting parents' informal learning: trust, which enables learning and makes it possible to bring up difficult issues without being or acting judgmental; a reflective culture, which promotes conversations, exchanges, credible feedback and a sense of emotional proximity; open learning infrastructures and tools, which ease the free flow of information and access to people or other essential resources or repositories. We hope this article is useful—not only for extending theory and research as to how parents learn, make meaning, and shape their and their family's identity in light of their family history and dominant cultural values—but also, for offering an expansion of professional and educator design and support systems and strategies that help parents address these essential learning tasks.

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